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## Cursing like a sailor, John Burton helped steer California into deep blue waters



John Burton, the chairman of the California Democratic Party, will be stepping down in May. (David Butow / For The Times)

By PHIL WILLON | STAFF WRITER

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Reporting from San Francisco — California Democratic Party Chairman John Burton stood before hundreds of loyalists at the party's 2015 convention and introduced Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren with a thunderous, trademark F-bomb.

“She is the [expletive] champion of the American people,” he shouted, igniting a roar of applause.

It was an unvarnished glimpse of one of California’s most influential politicians, a man with a well-earned reputation for his gruff style and for swearing [“more than a West Coast rapper,”](#) as comedian John Oliver remarked while interviewing him for “The Daily Show.”

It was Burton’s charm and razor-sharp political instincts honed over more than a half-century in politics that convinced Democrats to tap the 84-year-old San Francisco power broker, a former congressman and state Senate president, to lead their state party for going on eight years now.

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His reign, which ends in May, has coincided with escalating Democratic dominance in a state that was once led by Ronald Reagan. Under Burton, one of the state’s most devout disciples of liberal activism, Democrats are thriving in California while the party looks to regain its footing elsewhere in the U.S.

“It’s too bad he can’t be chair of the national party,” said former Assembly Speaker Willie Brown, a longtime Burton ally.

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In the November election, [California repelled the populist national uprising](#) that swept Donald Trump into the White House and has emerged as something akin to a left-wing rebel base primed to [counter Republicans now in control of Washington](#).

Democrats [recaptured a powerful supermajority](#) in both houses of the California Legislature, preventing Republicans from blocking tax increases or proposed constitutional amendments. They have held every statewide elected office since 2010. Since 2008, the once-red counties of Fresno, Riverside and San Diego have flipped to blue. And with the [Democrats’ edge over the GOP in voter registration](#) growing to almost 19%, the party’s stranglehold on the state isn’t expected to loosen any time soon.

The party “is more professional than it’s ever been in the history of the party,” Gov. Jerry Brown, who served briefly as party chairman from 1989-91, told the Times.

A variety of political factors have contributed to the Democrats’ rise to supremacy in California, including a Latino population that has been growing in number as well as political influence. Latinos have overwhelmingly voted for Democrats, in no small part because of the wave of anti-immigrant rhetoric by GOP politicians, from former Republican Gov. Pete Wilson to President-elect Trump.

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Brown and Burton said the state party has been able to capitalize on those trends, especially in recent years, by fundraising, organizing grassroots activists and shepherding party loyalists to the polls.

Alex Rooker, a vice chairman of the state party, praised Burton as one of the state's "last liberal lions" devoted to protecting children, the homeless and other vulnerable Californians, but said it's time for new leadership. While the party has devoted more resources to the county parties and grassroots activists under Burton, a number of local party leaders believe more can be done, Rooker said.

While the percentage of Californians registered as Republicans has been on a steady decline, the percentage of registered Democrats has been [stagnant for more than 15 years](#) — at roughly 45%. Meanwhile, more and more voters are registering as "no party preference," and they now account for a quarter of all registered voters in the state.

Actress Shirley MacLaine and John Burton, co-chairmen of the California delegation at the 1972 Democratic National Convention in Miami Beach, hug after pledging their support for Sen. George S. McGovern. (Associated Press )

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Shawnda Westly, senior strategist for the California Democratic Party, said that when Burton took the helm in 2009, he worked quickly to dispel concerns by some grassroots activists that he would be “another elected official trying to tie our hands.” He began providing county chapters with the state party’s voter database and handed out door-hangers, political mailers and other essentials and funds to register voters.

Westly said one of Burton’s most significant victories was his push for Proposition 25 in 2010, the measure California voters approved allowing lawmakers to pass the state budget with a majority rather than a two-thirds vote — eviscerating one of the GOP’s most potent political bargaining tools in the Democratic-controlled Legislature.

Angie Tate, the chief fundraiser for Brown and the state party, said that under Burton, the party’s staff was slashed from 34 to 17 people. The party purchased and refurbished a Sacramento building for its new headquarters, freeing it from expensive office leases in the capital and Los Angeles. Those cost-saving moves, along with Burton’s prodigious fundraising ability, helped provide money the party needed to [help Jerry Brown](#) in the 2010 governor’s race against former eBay chief executive Meg Whitman, along with hotly contested down-ballot races, she said.

“Meg Whitman was driving through California throwing \$150 million out the window,” Tate said. “We were able to spend the money we had to when it mattered.”

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Until Burton rose to become the leader of state Senate in 1999, his political career had largely existed in the shadow of his late older brother, Rep. Phil Burton, a San Francisco liberal with bullish demeanor. His brother, who lost a 1976 bid for House majority leader by a single vote, helped carve out Burton’s successful path to the Assembly and later to Congress.

But the younger Burton’s five terms in Congress ended abruptly when, consumed by an addiction to cocaine and booze, he quit in 1982 and checked himself into rehab. He said he never looked back once he got well.

His political revival began six years later when, after a lucrative stint as an attorney in private practice, he was once again elected to the California Legislature.

Along with his shaggy gray hair and fondness for guayabera shirts, Burton was — and still is — known for his no-nonsense style and ample repertoire of vulgarities.

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While those closest to him find those traits endearing and nonthreatening, not everyone feels the same. Rooker recalls Burton berating her with profanities after she unsuccessfully challenged him for party chair in 2009.

“I don’t think many of those things are acceptable any more,” Rooker said.

In 2008, the former executive director of the John Burton Foundation for Children Without Homes [sued Burton for allegedly sexually harassing her](#). Burton denied the allegation and the matter was settled out of court.

State Board of Equalization member Fiona Ma, who broke into politics two decades ago as one of Burton’s Senate aides, said she doesn’t know of any politician who has given more opportunities to women. Recently retired U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer worked as one of Burton’s legislative aides before she headed to Washington, and he brought in two women as the state party’s top advisers, Ma said.

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“The more John screams and cusses at you the more he loves you because he feels comfortable with you. That’s just how he is,” Ma said.

Burton’s departure will continue the slow but inevitable transformation of a state party leadership where a generation of younger Democrats have been blocked from ascending to California’s highest offices. Until this month, California’s two U.S. senators — Dianne Feinstein, 83, and Boxer, 76 — had served in Washington for more than two decades. Jerry Brown, 78, is serving a historic fourth term as California governor.

[That barrier began to melt away in November](#) when former state Atty. Gen. Kamala Harris, 52, was elected to replace Boxer. Term limits will force Brown from the governor’s office in 2018, and with Feinstein up for reelection that same year, speculation abounds about whether she will retire.

Los Angeles County Democratic Party Chairman Eric Bauman appears to be the front-runner to replace Burton. Bauman faces a challenge by Kimberly Ellis of San Francisco, executive director of an organization dedicated to increasing the number of Democratic women in elected office. Party delegates will elect a new chair at the annual convention in Sacramento in May.

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Burton said his successor should come in with the same attitude he had when he took over for longtime party chairman Art Torres. To make his point, Burton, an avid baseball fan, used a tale about former Los Angeles Dodgers manager Tommy Lasorda taking over as manager from Walter “Smokey” Alston in 1977.

During a conversation with Burton 20 years ago, Lasorda recalled being asked if he felt any pressure taking over for a Hall of Fame manager.

“I worry about the ... who’s following me,” Lasorda, also known for spraying curse words on occasion, told Burton. “That’s where the pressure is going to be.”

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[phil.willon@latimes.com](mailto:phil.willon@latimes.com)

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